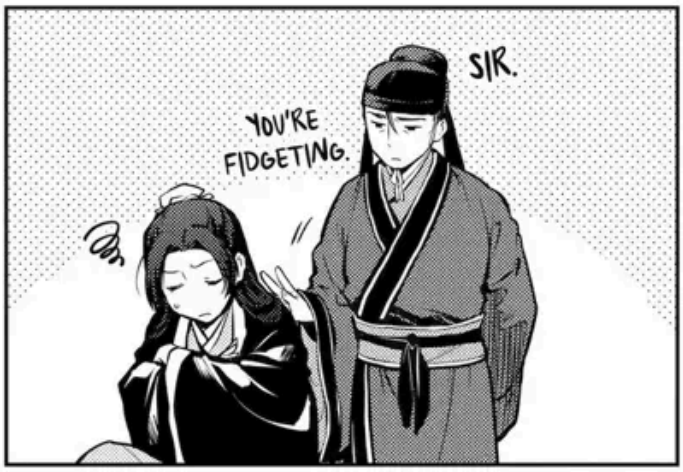
...AT WHICH POINT MAOMAO TOOK HER LEAVE.
医務室

NOD
THAT'S EVERY-THING?


SIR.
YOU'RE FIDGETING.

THMP
THMP
THMP

SHE'D USUALLY BE BACK ABOUT THIS TIME TO BEG FOR SOMETHING TO EAT. SHE'S LATE.
OUT TAKING A STROLL, I BELIEVE.
THE OTHER MAOMAO ISN'T HERE TODAY?

IT WAS RIGHT WHEN YOU'D RETIRED TO THE WASHROOM, LUOMEN.
AH.
HOW SO?
ACTUALLY, THE LAST TIME I SAW THE YOUNG LADY...
...THE FURRIER MAOMAO WAS PESTERING HER.
SHE WAS CLINGING TO THE GIRL QUITE PERSISTENTLY.

MAOMAO SAID SHE WAS GOING TO FETCH ALCOHOL AND A SLEEPING AID, CORRECT?
I... THINK SO?
IS THIS WHAT MAOMAO WAS GATHERING?
I DON'T QUITE KNOW... BUT THERE'S LESS THAN I RECALL.
HM.

IF IT WOULDN'T BE A BOTHER, MIGHT WE GO LOOK FOR THE FELINE MAOMAO?
IT WOULDN'T BE A BOTHER ...
...BUT HOW WOULD IT HELP, EXACTLY ?
I'M NOT SURE IT WOULD...
...BUT WE MAY FIND THE OTHER MAOMAO WHILE WE'RE AT IT.

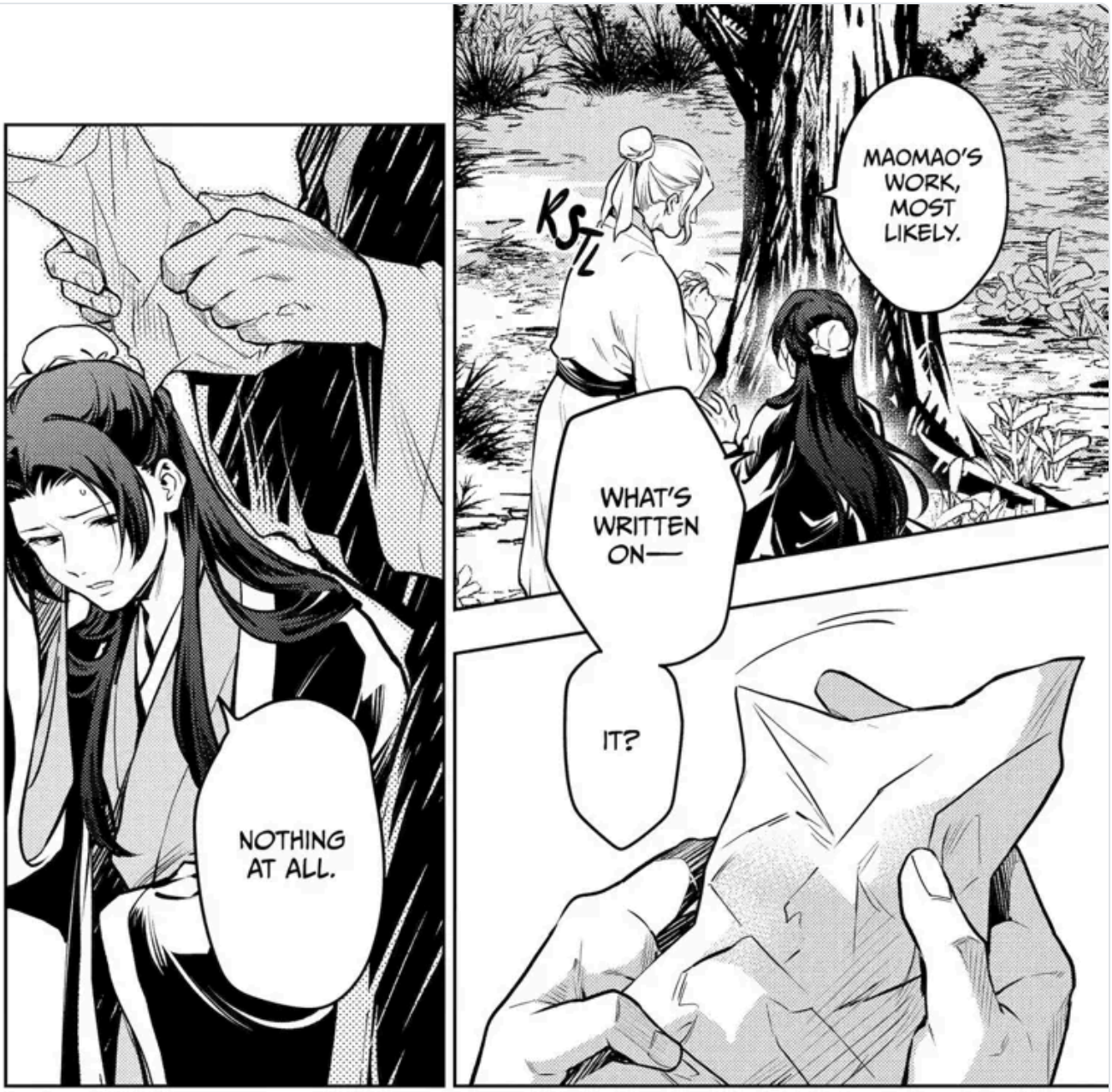
Chapter 73: Tracing Steps

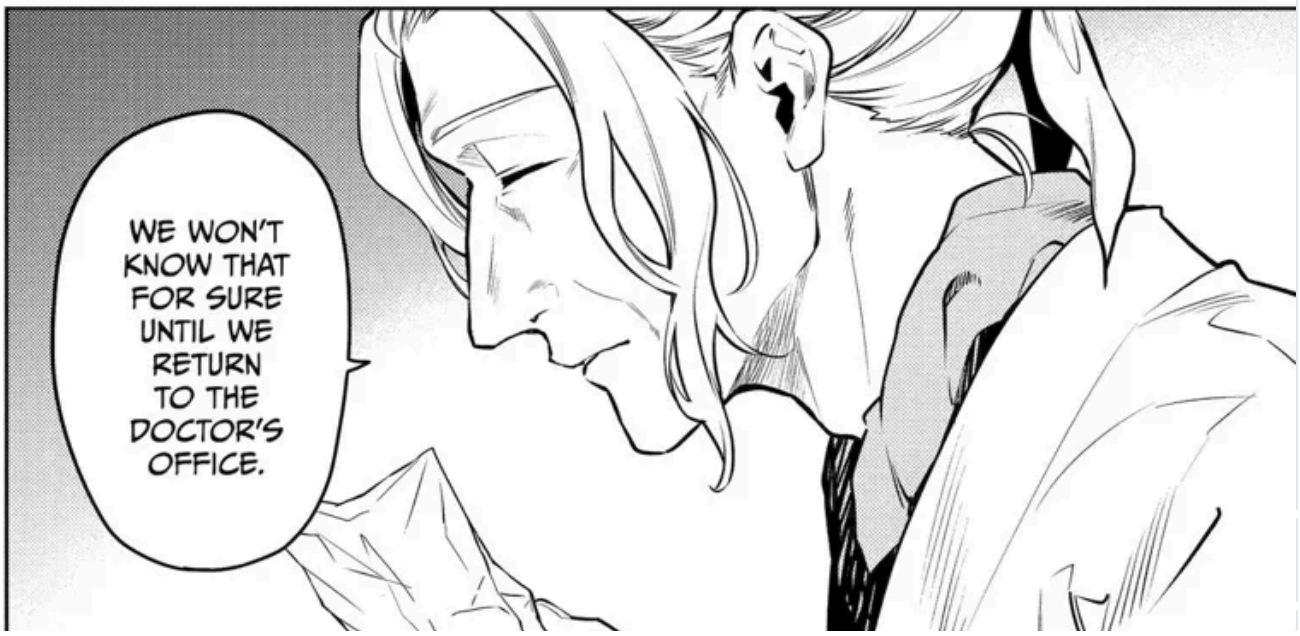
CATS ARE UNLIKELY TO STRAY FARTHER THAN 250 METERS.
STILL FRESH. THE SCENT IS STRONG.
IDEALLY, IT'S JUST WHAT WE'LL NEED.
I HEARD A KNEE WAS TAKEN AS PUNISHMENT BEFORE HE WAS DRIVEN FROM THE INNER COURT.
THE DEATH OF THE EMPEROR'S FIRST CHILD WAS LAID ON LUOMEN'S HEAD.

INFANT DEATH IS FAR FROM RARE. FOR HIM TO BE EXILED FOR THAT...
...JUST GOES TO SHOW HOW UNLUCKY HE IS.
MROW
MEOOW
MEOOW
GAO SHUN ALWAYS PLAYS THE PART OF THE STERN FATHER ...
...I BET BASEN WOULD GO WHITE AS A SHEET SEEING HIM NOW.
SIR JINSHI!
A CAT WAS FOUND PAST THE NORTH-SOUTH BORDER WALL!

HOW'D SHE GET PAST THE WALL?
WHAT?
SHE SEEMS... DRUNK, ALMOST.
MRRROW
THERE'S A SMALL HOLE YOU CAN SEE RIGHT HERE.

THAT WOULD BE THE FRUIT OF THIS TREE.
SILVERVINE, IT'S CALLED. CATS ARE VERY FOND OF IT.
BREWED INTO A TEA, IT HELPS ALLEVIATE COLD AND PROMOTES SLEEP.
MAOMAO MUST HAVE GRABBED THIS FOR CONSORT GYOKUYOU.
AND, IF YOU'LL FOLLOW THE CLAW MARKS ON THE TREE...
A BALLED UP SCRAP OF PAPER HIDDEN WITH THE FRUIT!


NOTHING AT ALL.
KSTL
WHAT'S WRITTEN ON—
IT?
MAOMAO'S WORK, MOST LIKELY.


WE WON'T KNOW THAT FOR SURE UNTIL WE RETURN TO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE.

SWSH
THERE WAS A LITTLE GAME SHE LOVED TO PLAY AS A YOUNG GIRL.
HOLD THE PAPER TO A FIRE...
...LIKE SO.
!
WRITING APPEARED!

BUT IT MAKES THE AREA BURN QUICKER WHEN PASSED OVER A FLAME.
WRITE ON PAPER LIKE THIS WITH A FRUIT JUICE OR A TEA...
...AND IT WILL APPEAR BLANK.
IS THERE A SHRINE IN THAT AREA, LIKE THIS FIRST CHARACTER?
THERE ARE PLENTY OF VERY OLD BUILDINGS THERE.
PROBABLY ONE OR TWO SHINES AMONG THEM.
ACTUALLY, THE YOUNG LADY...
...DID TAKE ALCOHOL WITH HER WHEN SHE LEFT.
WHICH MEANS...
...THIS IS A MESSAGE MAOMAO LEFT FOR US.

CAN YOU TELL WHAT IT IS?
NOT AT ALL.
THIS OTHER CHARACTER, BELOW THE "SHRINE."
IT LOOKS LIKE A SIMPLIFIED LETTER, BUT IT'S TOO DIRTY TO MAKE OUT.
MAYBE WE SHOULD ASK AT THE JADE PALACE.
I SEE.
AS I THOUGHT, SOMETHING HAPPENED TO MAOMAO. SOMETHING UNEXPECTED, THAT'S KEEPING HER FROM RETURNING.
THE WRITING LOOKS HASTY.

I'M STARTING TO SEE WHY SHE HOLDS HIM IN SUCH HIGH ESTEEM.
AND HE DID JUST THAT, IN SHORT ORDER.
...SHE LEFT A CLUE FOR LUOMEN TO FIND.
EVEN IF WE'RE UNLIKELY TO FIND HER...
DO YOU THINK SHE'S SAFE?

AREN'T YOU WORRIED?
I AM.
BUT I SIMPLY CAN'T ALLOW MY WORRIES TO DISRUPT MY WORK.
PHWOO
I WOULDN'T KNOW.
UGH...
...
IT WASN'T LONG AGO THAT I SPENT A FULL YEAR WITHOUT ANY WORD FROM HER.
THE "LADY HUNTERS." WHAT CAN I EVEN SAY TO THAT?
I CAN ONLY DO WHAT I CAN.

SHE WAS KIDNAPPED, AND SOLD TO THE INNER COURT...
...LABORING AS A MAID WITHOUT EVER RAISING ANY FUSS.
SHE TAKES AFTER HIM, IN A WEIRD WAY.

THE WRITING IS ALL A MESS.
ALMOST LIKE IT WAS WRITTEN IN ADVERSE CIRCUM-STANCES.
IT'S FILTHY.
NO, NO.
THE BOTTOM HALF IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.
STILL, MAOMAO'S WRITING WAS ALWAYS SO... "UNIQUE."
WHAT MIGHT THIS EVEN BE?
IS IT "WING," PERHAPS?
LET'S ASK FOR MORE OPINIONS.

IS IT "NEXT?" IT LOOKS LIKE IT.
HMMM... CLOSE, BUT I DON'T THINK SO.
I WANT TO SAY IT LOOKS UNFINISHED.
"SUI?" AS IN "JADE?"
IS IT...

BUT WHAT COULD "JADE" MEAN HERE? "SUI?"
THAT'S TRUE, THEN IT WOULD BE "JADE."
JADE PALACE ?
LOOK.
IF THIS LINE WERE STRAIGHT, AND NOT SLANTED...
JADE... SUI...
MMBL
... SHISUI?
WHAT WAS THAT?

AH!
UM...
STARE...
I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S WRITTEN WITH "JADE," BUT...
...SHE AND SHISUI AND XIAOLAN HANG OUT A LOT.
THAT'S THE NAME OF A MAID SHE... SPENDS TIME WITH.
TWIRL
TWIRL
TWIRL

I SEE.

THERE'S ONE OTHER NAME WRITTEN WITH THE JADE "SUI" THAT COMES TO MIND.
THE LADY-IN-WAITING THAT ROSE FROM THE DEAD.
FIND THE MAID NAMED SHISUI!
SQK

SIR JINSHI.
AH!

DON'T ALLOW THE MASK TO SLIP...
STAY CALM.
RIGHT. RIGHT.
DISCOVERED LATER, NEAR WHERE THE SMALLER MAOMAO WAS FOUND...
...WAS AN OLD SHRINE BEHIND A WARE-HOUSE.
OLD AND WORN DOWN ...
...THE ENTRANCE LED TO ONE OF THE OLD WATERWAYS.

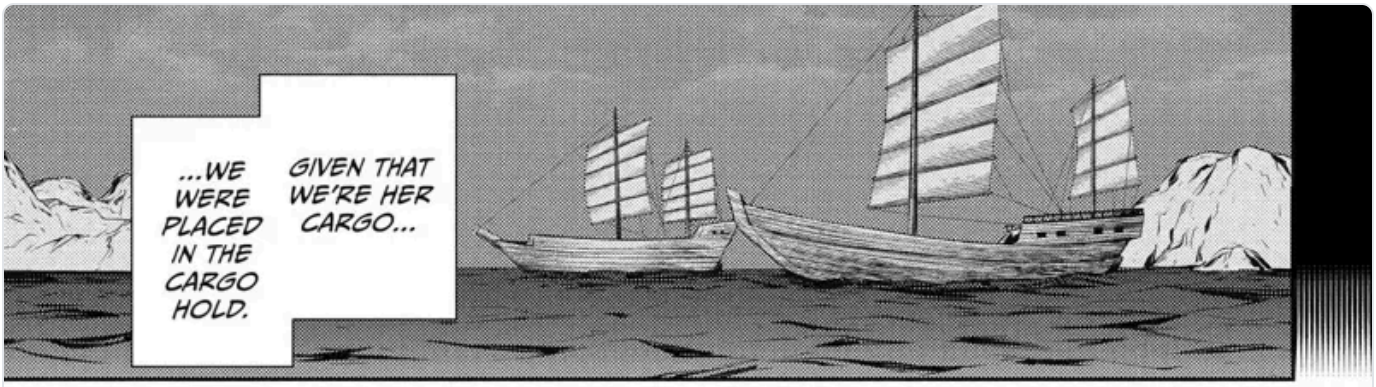
THERE WAS NO MAID NAMED "SHISUI" REGISTERED ANYWHERE WITHIN THE INNER COURT.
THE UNNAMED MAID...
...HAD VANISHED, ALONG WITH ONE OF THE NEW EUNUCHS.

WE'RE FLOATING AWAY.
IN THE END ...
...I DECIDED TO AGREE TO SUIREI'S TERMS.
NO IDEA.
WHERE DO YOU THINK WE'RE GOING?
THE REVIVAL ELIXIR HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. HONEST.
IF I HADN'T, I DOUBT I'D HAVE GOTTEN AWAY UN-SCATHED.

SUIREI STEPPED INSIDE A SHRINE BUILDING ...
...WHILE SHENLÜ STOOD GUARD OUTSIDE.
SUIREI TOOK US SOME-PLACE THAT WAS ...
...CLOSE TO WHERE I FIRST DISCOVERED THE KITTEN MAOMAO.
AN AREA BEHIND A WALL.
AH HAH.
ACK.
THIS IS MY CHANCE TO MAKE MY PLAY.
WHAT'RE YOU UP TO, MAOMAO?
SWSH

PA SHOULD NOTICE THAT, RIGHT?
...INSIDE A NEARBY TREE AND COVERED IT UP.
IN A HASTE, I SHOVED THE SILVER VINE I WAS CARRYING ...
MY ONLY REAL CONCERN IS THAT THE SECOND CHARACTER I WROTE MIGHT BE TOO WONKY TO READ.
THE SCANT CLUES AVAILABLE SHOULD BE ENOUGH TO LET PA TRACK ME.
THAT'S THE KIND OF MAN HE IS.
BENEATH THE SHRINE WAS A STAIRWAY BIG ENOUGH FOR ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

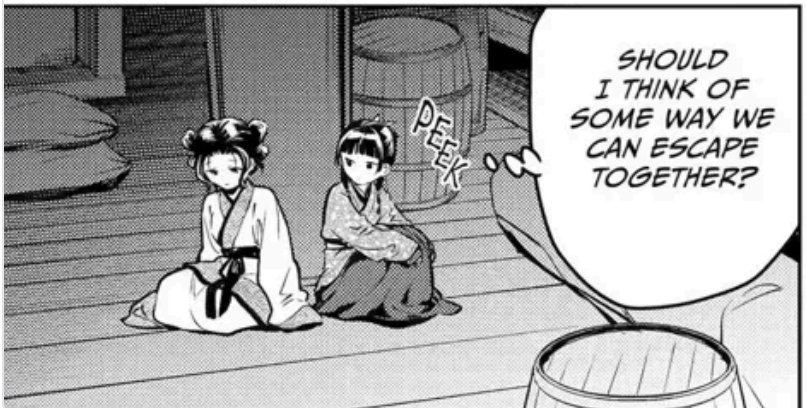
PERHAPS IT WAS AN ESCAPE ROUTE CONSTRUCTED ALONGSIDE THE WATERWAYS.
THE UNDER-GROUND TUNNEL IT LED TO WAS TOO LARGE TO BE A WATERWAY.
I BET THE KITTEN MAOMAO ENTERED THE INNER COURT FROM HERE.
THE PASSAGE LED ALL THE WAY OUTSIDE OF THE INNER COURT...
...TO A CARRIAGE THAT TOOK US TO THE HARBOR.
THE STORY SUIREI GAVE TO THE SAILORS WAS THAT WE WERE GIRLS WHO HAD BEEN SOLD OFF BY OUR FAMILIES.
I SUPPOSE SHE'S PLAYING THE PART OF A FLESH MERCHANT.


...WE WERE PLACED IN THE CARGO HOLD.
GIVEN THAT WE'RE HER CARGO...

...BUT SUIREI'S KEEPING WATCH JUST OUTSIDE THE ROOM, DRESSED UP AS A MAN.
MY HANDS ARE UNBOUND ...

BUT WHAT DO I DO NOW?
...I MANAGED TO SLIP MY HAIRPIN INTO THE ENSEMBLE.
WHEN I CHANGED FROM MY LADY-IN-WAITING CLOTHING TO THE VILLAGE GIRL CLOTH-ING...

...HAVE ME FEELING VERY UNWELL.
THIS DANK STENCH AND THE ROCK-ING...


SHOULD I THINK OF SOME WAY WE CAN ESCAPE TOGETHER?
PEEK

PAT
PAT
GOING TO SLEEP?
NO...
YES.

I WILL, TOO.